

World for the Fallen

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Summary: This is a Rise of the Brave Tangled Dragons story! Basically Merida, Hiccup, Jack, and Rapunzel are yanked out of their worlds in the most inconvenient moment, and must go on a series of adventures to leave the strange world they're now in.

1. Part I: Snatched

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oOo

Jack's body hit the ice hard. If he could feel cold, he was sure he would've. Pitch's mocking laughter echoed down the crevice, fading as Jack's staff clattered against the ground. It was over. He was as useless as his now broken staff. He had always been useless.

oOo

Merida searched for any sign of her mother in the bear, but all that stared back at her were the eyes of an animal. Her face crumpled, and she wrenched her shoulders in a sob.

"Oh mum...I'm sorry," she choked out. The bear blinked blankly.

"This is all my fault," Merida said, "I did this to you."

oOo

Rapunzel tried to press her hair at Eugene's wound. He protested weakly, pushing her hands away.

"I can't let you do this," he said. Tears welled up in Rapunzel's eyes.

"And I can't let you die," she replied. Eugene shook his head.

"But if you do this, then you will die," he said. Rapunzel shushed him, and gave him a sad smile.

"Hey," she said, "It's gonna be alright." Again, Eugene shook his head.

"Wait, Rapunzel," he said.

oOo

Hiccup felt himself slipping before it happened. He tried desperately to grab onto Toothless, but the dragon's ears barely escaped his fingers. And then he was falling. The heat of the dragon king's exploding body was so great on his back he felt like he was burning. Maybe he was burning, he couldn't be sure. Maybe he was screaming, or maybe his mouth was simply open in silent terror. He closed his eyes, waiting for the flames to engulf him, or the ground to snap him like glass.

Time seemed to slow as the moment neared, the heat beneath him cooled, and the sounds of the battle faded to nothing. And with a jolt, he hit cold water. His eyes snapped open. He'd had no time to take a breath, and he could not tell up from down. He began to flail his arms sluggishly, but could not find the surface. Then he was falling again. He dropped to the ground with a loud thud, and moaned at the pain he felt all over. Summoning the courage, he opened his eyes.

He was dead. Oh, gods he was dead. The island had completely disappeared, as had the dragons and the battle. He was laying in the middle of a dark forest thick with fog. The branches above were so dense he could not see the sky, and the ground he was laying on was damp. Even though there was no discernible light source, he could see quite clearly, as if the entire world emitted a slight glow. Slowly, Hiccup got to his feet. He felt his clothes and hair; they were soaking wet.

"Toothless?" he called, though he didn't really expect an answer. Dragons were fireproof, after all. Toothless would've survived the blast just fine. Just like Hiccup thought, there was noâ€

"..._hello_...?" someone called, faintly.

"Hello?!" Hiccup yelled in the direction he thought the shout came from.

"..._who's there._..." Hiccup started walking towards the voice.

"Over here!"

"..._over where_..." Hiccup started to run, careful not to trip on the undergrowth.

"Hereâ€"ah!" he shouted, crashing into someone and knocking them both to the ground. The someone scrambled out from under him.

"Who are you!" she yelled with a thick scottish accent. She pulled a knife from her belt and held it out at Hiccup. He got to his feet slowly, holding his hands up.

"My name is Hiccup...who are you?"

"How did I get here?" the girl snarled, "What spell did you use?" Hiccup frowned.

"I didn't bring you here. I don't even know how I got here," Hiccup said. The girl narrowed her eyes, bringing the knife up higher.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" she said.

"Does he look like he has magic?" a third voice muttered. Hiccup and the girl whirled to face another boy. He had white hair and was standing barefoot, arms crossed, a few feet away.

"Who are you?!" the girl demanded, pointing her knife at him. A look of confusion came over the boy's face.

"Wait a second, you can see me?" he said.

"Of course," Hiccup replied. A half-smile flickered across the boy's face, then turned into a scowl.

"Don't pretend you're going to stab me with that," he said to the girl. She took a step closer.

"_Who are you_?" The boy looked from her face to the knife and back.

"Fine. I'm Jack Frost," he said, "What about you?"

"I am Merida, firstborn descendant of Clan Dunbroch. I demand you tell me how we got here."

"Well I'm sorry Princess, but I don't know either. One minute I was laying at the bottom of an ice crevice, the next I fell into this freaky forest. So you tell _me_ how we got here." Merida lowered the knife slowly.

"And how do I know _you're_ telling the truth?" she said.

"You don't," Jack snapped. Merida debated for a moment, then sheathed her knife and flicked a strand of wet hair out of her face.

"Okay, good," Hiccup said, "Now that we've put all the weapons away, maybe we can figure out where exactly we are."

"We're in a forest, obviously," Merida said. Hiccup nodded.

"I'd gathered that," he said, "But I was thinking more: where is the forest?" Jack looked up.

"You can't see the stars from here," he said, "Hold on a second." He braced himself, then jumped, and fell back to the ground with a crash and a groan. Hiccup slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from smiling. Merida, on the other hand, burst out laughing.

"What?" Jack muttered to himself, getting to his feet and brushing himself off.

"What did you expect was going to happen?" Merida pointed out. Jack glared at her.

"Iâ€"I...don't know," he said.

"Oh, wee lamb," Merida cooed. Jack crossed his arms.

"I'd like to see you figure out where we are," he snapped. Merida smirked, and walked over to one of the tall pine trees. She grabbed hold of the bark and started climbing. Jack and Hiccup watched in amazement as she scaled the trunk effortlessly.

"Woah," Hiccup said as she disappeared into the thick branches, "She showed you."

Jack scoffed.

"Anyone could do that," he said. Hiccup raised an eyebrow, and motioned towards the pine.

"Be my guest." Jack leaned back against an oak tree.

"No use both of us going up there," he retorted. Hiccup grinned.

"Of course," he replied. About ten minutes later, Merida reappeared.

"Anything?" Hiccup called up to her. She gave a muffled reply.

"What?" he said as she made it to the ground. She turned to face them, concern clearly showing on her face.

"Nothing," she said.

"You mean the stars aren't familiar?"

"No," Merida said, "I mean there aren't any. The sky is black as ink. It's not like anything I've ever seen."

"So then what do we do?" Jack asked. Both he and Merida looked to Hiccup expectantly.

"Um..." Hiccup said, surprised at the sudden responsibility, "I think we should start walking through the forest, try to find the edge."

"And which way is that?" Jack asked, back to sarcasm. Hiccup looked around him.

"Well..." he said, "Any way, right now." All three of them stood still for a moment, undecided on what to do next.

"Um...this way," Hiccup said. He pointed to his right.

"Alright," Merida said.

"Fine," said Jack. And so they started off in that direction, walking as much in a straight line as they could. It was hard to tell exactly what was straight in this forest, due to the fog. The tree Hiccup used as a reference faded in and out of sight, and so he found himself unsure of which direction he was supposed to be heading. He didn't tell Merida and Jack, but he had the distinct feeling they were going in a circle.

As they walked, Merida started wringing the water out of her hair. It was tasking work, requiring all the the muscles she'd built up doing archery. And even when she got a few chunks of hair moderately dry, they seemed to start dripping water all over again a few minutes later. Her dress was even worse. The thick fabric was not meant for being wet in a cold forest, and it clung to her and made her shiver. If the boys noticed, they didn't say anything, and neither of them seemed remotely bothered about being soaking wet. _It's annoying_, Merida thought. Eventually she gave up on her hair and just flung it over her shoulder. It wouldn't stay, of course, but it was better than nothing.

Jack, walking in the back of the line, made sure Merida and Jack weren't watching before he tried a little hop into the air, hoping the air would catch him and carry him up to the treetops. It didn't, and he landed back on the ground with a wet squilsh of moss and dead leaves. Luckily the others seemed too lost in their own thoughts to notice. Discretely, Jack cupped his hands and blew cold air into them, trying to form a snowball. Nothing. His powers were gone, completely. Forcing himself to breathe normally, Jack shoved his hands down in the pocket of his hoodie.

It wasn't until the fourth time Hiccup passed the twisted tree with the moss shaped like a heart that he forced the group to stop. By this time, Merida's hair was beginning to become springy again, and she had pulled the hem of her dress up and tucked it into her belt to keep it from weighing her down. Jack had pulled his hood up and over his forehead, and hunched his shoulders moodily. Both of them were tired, irritated, and not going to take the bad news well. They watched, annoyed, as Hiccup put his thoughts together.

"Well?" Merida said, prodding him.

"We've seen this tree four times," Hiccup said, pointing to the tree with the heart shaped moss.

"What?" Merida snapped.

"You've got to be kidding me," Jack muttered.

"We're going in circles," Hiccup said, "It's too hard to get anywhere with the fog."

"We've been walking for hours!" Jack said.

"I know, and we need to rest," Hiccup replied. Merida shook her head furiously.

"We can't stop!" she protested. Jack scoffed, turning his eyes skyward.

"Kill me now," he said under his breath.

"It's the truth!" Merida said, "We've no food. No water. We need to get out of this forest!"

"And that's not gonna happen if we keep wandering around aimlessly!" Jack replied. Hiccup stepped between the two, shouting over their argument.

"Okay, okay, OKAY!" he exclaimed, "Merida, we do need to get out of here. Jack, we do need a new plan. Let's rest for awhile and try to come up with something. Alright?"

Grudgingly, Merida and Jack gave their approval.

"Alright," Hiccup said. He sat down. Merida sat down immediately after, but Jack walked over to a tree and sat down so he could lean against it. Pulling his hood farther over his eyes, he closed his eyes.

"What are you doing?" Merida asked. Jack cracked open one eye and looked at them.

"Resting," he replied, "Because I'm tired. Let me know when you come up with something."

"You can't sleep?" Merida started to protest, but Hiccup put a hand on her arm and shook his head. She pulled her arm away from him, but let Jack alone anyway.

"We need to focus on getting out of here. Any ideas?" Merida thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"I've never been farther than the lands surrounding Castle Dunbroch. I know those woods as well as any huntsman, but I've never seen a forest like this one. It's magic, and dangerous at that." Hiccup watched her, curious.

"You really think magic is real?" he asked. Merida drew herself up stiffly.

"Think it? I know it! I've seen it!" she said. Hiccup smiled.

"Court magicians don't count. They're tricksters, all of them," he said. Merida crossed her arms, further offended.

"I'm no child!" She said, "The magic I speak of is a dark art, practiced only by the most untrustworthy of villains. It can even transform a person into a bear."

"A person into a bear?" Hiccup said, incredulous. Merida nodded.

"Sounds like quite a circus," Hiccup said. Narrowing her eyes, Merida punched him in the shoulder.

"Ow!" he protested.

"I've seen it!" was all she said in reply. Hiccup shrugged.

"Anyway," he said, "We need to get out of here." Merida looked around at the trees with a sigh. She was far better at making problems than solving them. Hiccup watched her expression grow sad, eyebrows arching up her forehead and hands knitting together in her lap.

"What's wrong?" he asked. Merida looked up, sorrow wiped from her face.

"We can't find our way out of this forest, that's what's wrong!" Merida exclaimed.

"The problem is, we don't even know how to keep going in a line. Walk far enough and we'll eventually get out of it, but if we're not going straight it doesn't matter." Merida nodded. Closing her eyes, she scrunched up her nose and tried very hard to think of what to do. Hiccup mused quietly to himself. As Merida tried to come up with something, she felt her thoughts start to wander off topic. When she wasn't able to see the fog, the forest felt almost like the one back home. The ground was the same, moist and giving, and covered in slick leaves. If there had been birdsong, she could have almost imagined she was home. I wish he'd be quiet, Merida thought as Hiccup stood and started pacing. He was making too much noise, nearly drowning out the relaxing sound of flowing water.

Eyes snapping open, Merida sat up very straight.

"Do you think that would work?" Hiccup asked, referring to whatever Merida hadn't been listening to.

"What? No. Be quiet," she snapped.

"What?" he asked, shifting on the leaves again. Merida grabbed his arm and pulled him down to the ground, slapping a hand over his mouth.

"Shhh!" she hissed. Then she closed her eyes, and opened her ears. Hiccup mumbled under her hand.

"Hush!" Very, very confused, he did as he was told. After a second of quiet, Merida began to smile. She opened her eyes and looked at Hiccup.

"I've found our way out," she said. Grabbing a pinecone beside her, she threw it at Jack. It bounced off his head, and he opened his eyes angrily.

"Hey!" he protested.

"Come on numbskulls!" Merida said, jumping to her feet and heading off in a random direction. Exchanging a confused glance, Hiccup and Jack lurched to their feet and ran after her before she disappeared in the fog. They heard her squeal with delight.

"What is going on?" Jack demanded as he and Hiccup skidded to a halt behind her. Merida pointed down at a tiny stream in front of them. It was no more than three feet across.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Jack repeated. Merida crossed her

arms.

"It's moving water, which means it must be going downhill, which means it will probably exit the forest at some point."

"And if it doesn't?" Jack asked.

"You wanted a plan," Merida shot back.

"Hey, okay," Hiccup said, playing peacemaker, "Let's just get going. It's all we've got."

And so they set out, following the stream. It wavered back and forth, never widening more than six feet, and sometimes narrowing to only a foot across. Merida walked confidently in front, arms swinging back and forth in an unladylike manner. Her hair was long since dry, and Hiccup found himself marveling at the mess of bouncing curls. They were as red as dragon's flame—his heart pounded just a little faster at the memory—and unruly, sliding over and around each other like snakes. They extended far beyond her head, making her look almost top heavy. And when she skipped a step happily, which she did every few steps, they jerked about wildly.

Hiccup was distracted from Merida's hair by Jack's muttering to himself.

"She hit me with a pinecone," he said under his breath, "A pinecone!" Hiccup tried not to look behind him, but he couldn't help snickering a little. Jack was even odder than Merida. The worst that could be said for the princess was her rapidly changing moods, but Jack was a different matter altogether. He seemed constantly bitter, talked to himself, and Hiccup wasn't entirely sure he was sane. The strange clothes, and the strange hair, and the distinct lack of shoes made him even more mysterious.

"Hey Jack," he said over his shoulder.

"What?" Jack said.

"When you first came into the clearing, you asked us if we could see you, what did you mean?" Hiccup turned and started walking backwards to see Jack's reaction. The boy shrugged.

"Most people ignore me," he said, "I don't have many friends." At the front of the line, Merida scoffed.

"Imagine that," she muttered. Jack scowled.

"But why wouldn't we see you?" Hiccup pressed. Jack's scowl deepened.

"None of your business," he snapped.

"Alright," Hiccup said, shrugging, "Alright, that's cool too." His foot caught on a root and nearly sent him sprawling to the ground. A momentary smile flicked across Jack's face, then he forced the scowl back on.

"Maybe you should turn around," he said. Grinning sheepishly, Hiccup turned, just in time to see Merida shout happily and run forward. He

started out after her, making sure to watch his feet for any more roots. Abruptly, he was out of the forest and free of the fog.

Merida turned, facing Hiccup and Jack. Bluish light, different from the grey-green of the forest, cloaked her. It washed out the color of her hair, but could not hide the delighted expression on her face.

"We're out!" she said, giggling like a child. Jack stepped forwards, looking beyond the girl.

"But where are we?" he said. Hiccup followed his gaze. They stood on a tall hill, covered in grass. The ground swept down below them smoothly, and they could see everything in front of them. And it was strange.

oOo

Rapunzel walked through the forest, soaking wet and shivering. Her hair trailed behind her limply.

"Hello?" she called for the umpteenth time, "Is anyone there?" She could not think of how she got where she was. One minute she was with an injured Eugene, and the next she was sitting in a pond in the forest. She had seen no signs of humanity since she started walking, nor did she recognize anything around her.

As tears began to gather in her eyes, her hair snagged on something and she came crashing down to the ground. She sat up, and began pulling roughly at the mass of hair behind her, but it was caught tightly and was not letting go. Rapunzel gave up, and pulled her knees up to her chest, sobbing. _Get UP! _She screamed at herself. _Eugene needs you! He's DYING somewhere out there. _But even as her thoughts went on, her muscles refused to obey them. Emptiness pushed down on her chest, making breathing even harder.

Beyond her loud sobs, Rapunzel heard a faint noise. She stopped immediately, looking around frantically to see what it was. A shadow in the forest began to come forward, separating itself from the rest of the darkness. Rapunzel scrambled backwards on all fours, but her hair slowed her down. As the figure came closer, she let out a scream.

* * *

><p>So that's it for the first chapter. I've never written any ROBTD stuff before, but I thought I would try it out. I've had some free time lately too, and I've been getting back into writing. Anyway, let me know if this is worth pursuing, and thanks for reading!

2. Part II: Bear Boy

Part II: Bear Boy

oOo

The world stretched out below Hiccup, Merida, and Jack, uniformly lit

in silver-blue moonlight in a manner that seemed only possible in wild dreamscapes. Hiccup looked up. Merida was right, there were no stars, only a large white moon. The hill on which they stood overlooked a quaint little valley, at the end of which was a lake. And even though it was farther away, the lake seemed to rise in their vision above the valley and the road through it. And beyond the lake was a great chain of mountains, which became like great columns towering into the sky. And farther, beyond that, the ground became so far and so large that a single grain of sand in the desert on the other side of the mountains seemed larger than the highest peak. And so it went on until eternity, until the earth met the almost empty black sky. It must be a dream, Hiccup thought. He turned, looking back at the forest, and saw the same on the other side. The trees grew larger, reaching higher up to the moon the farther away they were.

"This is magic," Merida breathed out.

"This is crazy," Jack muttered, staring up at the moon overhead. Turning back to the valley, Hiccup set his sights on the lake.

"Come on," he said, "There'll be people near the water."

They started out down the road, still marveling at the world around them. Hiccup led the way, followed by Merida, followed by Jack. They walked until the moon was low in the sky behind them. Jack clenched his hands together in the pocket of his hoodie, eyes flicking to either side of the path. Tall grasses rose to their chest on either side, and it made him nervous. Never before had he felt so helpless, without his powers and without his staff. His hands itched to hold the familiar grooves of the wood, to feel its weight balancing him as he rode the updrafts and swirling eddies away from all dangers. But it was back, broken, in the ravine.

For an instant, Jack thought he heard something moving in the grasses. Stopping, he listened very carefully, but could only hear Merida and Hiccup's boots on the dirt road. As he began walking again he heard another rustle of dry plant stalks, first on the right, then the left. He caught up to Merida and Jack as naturally as he could and put his hand on Merida's shoulder.

"Hey," he said softly, hoping Hiccup could hear.

"What?" Merida said loudly. Jack sighed, but answered as quietly as before.

"I think someone's following us." Hiccup and Merida stopped, alarmed. Great, Jack thought, just give us away, won't you?

—

"Don't stop!" he hissed. As soon as he spoke, a group of black-clad men burst out from the grass. Each had a badge sewn onto his sleeve, a crest with a star and a sword in silver thread. Every man looked unsavory.

"Bandits!" Hiccup yelled. He wheeled around to face the threat behind him. Merida pulled out her knife, eyes narrowing fiercely. Jack turned his back to Merida and Hiccup, feeling useless and clumsy without a weapon. The first man dove at him with a sword. Jack managed to duck under him, tripping him as he passed. The man went

sprawling to the ground. Jack jumped on top of him, wrestling a knife from his belt and lurching back to his feet before the man could roll over and pull him to the ground. He kicked the man in the head, and then turned to face the rest of his attackers. Jack wasn't sure how Merida and Hiccup were faring, but he didn't have time to check. The next man to go after him was taller and more sickly, with hollowed cheeks and sunken eyes. He brought a knife down at Jack's head. Jack brought his blade up, catching his enemy's weapon inches before his nose. The man started to push him down towards the ground. Steeling himself, Jack kicked out at the man's legs, catching him in the knee. He went down, blade cutting into Jack's cheek on the way. Jack stepped on the hand that held the knife, and only hesitated for a moment before plunging his own blade into the man's back. Jack winced at the man's pained yell, and pulled his knife out roughly. At that moment, he heard Merida's angry scream. Turning, he saw the man he'd left earlier throw her over his shoulder. The man ran from the road, carving a faint path through the grass as he started to disappear. Hiccup, downing another enemy with a stolen blade, yelled to Jack.

"Jack! Go after Merida!"

"What?" Jack yelled, slicing at a bandit's hand. "Leave you here?"

"GO!" Hiccup shouted. Shaking his head, Jack took off into the grass, following Merida's angry insults as best he could. Leaving Hiccup alone. With at least six bandits. They formed a circle around him, weapons drawn. Hiccup jumped forward, knocking the smallest bandit to the ground and stomping on his neck. Two more grabbed at him. He twisted, managing to stab at one's head. The knife ripped out of his hand. Hiccup and the other bandit went careening to the ground, and he registered pain in his right side. Half on accident, Hiccup threw his elbow back at the bandit's face, and the squirming beneath him stilled.

He wrenched the sword from the man's hand and turned to the remaining enemies. One of the bandits leapt forward at him, and Hiccup threw himself to the ground, then grabbed the man's ankles. Scrambling to his knees, Hiccup struck him in the head with the hilt of the blade. He pushed himself back onto his feet, and faced off the last two bandits.

Except he didn't need to really, because they'd already high-tailed it back off the road to whatever hole they'd crawled out of. Hiccup stood, breathing hard. He pressed his hand to the his side, and winced. There was blood there, and a ragged hole in his shirt.

"Ju-ust great," he muttered. It hurt, but he had more important things to worry about.

Cautiously, Hiccup started rifling through the clothes of the unconscious bandits. He took a few knives, a bow and quiver of arrows, then headed off the road to find Merida and Jack. He travelled as quickly and silently as possible, hoping no other dangerous persons had heard their scuffle.

oOo

Jack ran towards Merida's yelling. The bandit was now shouting back at her, calling her unflattering names and telling her to be quiet if she wanted to keep her tongue. They appeared before him suddenly in the tall grass, Merida beating on the bandit's back with her bare fists, elbowing the back of his head, and kicking his front. He was so large, it didn't seem to make much of an impact.

"Hey!" Jack yelled, gripping his blood-soaked knife nervously. The bandit turned to face him, brandishing his weapon. Steeling himself, Jack jumped forward and threw himself to the side at the last minute. The bandit had already swung his sword, and Merida's beating pulled him out of balance. He stumbled for a moment, which was just enough time for Jack to slash at the arm holding Merida. Yelling in pain, the man dropped Merida roughly to the ground. She let out a muted yelp, then lay on the grass for a moment, dazed. Jack grinned triumphantly, then felt pain as he was hit over the head. The bandit had abandoned the sword, and now readied for another punch. Jack dove towards him, stabbing at the already injured arm as best he could. The bandit evaded the swipe of the knife, and grabbed Jack's head, bringing it down nose-first on his knee. Jack went limp. The bandit dropped him, turning back to the girl. Meridaâ€"now recoveredâ€"had retrieved the man's sword. He watched her carefully, and she narrowed her eyes, lifting the blade in an experienced defensive stance. Backing away slowly, the man disappeared into the grasses, then turned and ran. When Merida heard his footfalls fade into silence, she ran over to Jack, dropping the sword to the ground.

"Oh no," She said. She knelt down by Jack's head.

"No, no, no..." Merida said. She pressed her ear to his chest, listening for a heartbeat, but heard nothing.

"No!" She grabbed his hoodie and shook him, but he didn't respond. She sat back, dazed, breath uneven.

"I'm sorry Jack," she whispered, "This is all my fault. I shouldn't have let him grab me."

Merida felt tears come to her eyes, and she took a ragged breath, trying to hold in sobs. She couldn't cry now. Not again.

Jack moaned.

"What happened?" he mumbled, sitting up and opening his eyes. Merida stared at him.

"But you were-you were dead! I checked! How-what-what is this?"

"You must've made a mistake," Jack said, getting slowly to his feet. He stretched out his arms and back with a few cracks and pops, then glanced around.

"Where's Hiccup?"

"Right here," Hiccup called, coming around the bend.

"Dude, what happened to you?" Jack said, spotting the blood on Hiccup's clothing.

"It's not mine," Hiccup lied, "We should get going. The last few

bandits ran off, but they'll probably be coming back with friends." He paused, and looked at Merida, who was still sitting on the ground and staring up at Jack with a half-dazed, half-scared expression.

"Merida, are you alright?" He asked.

"Yeah...I'm fine," she said. Shaking her head, she stood.

"We need to keep going," she declared.

"Alright," Hiccup said, "Let's get back to the main road."

By the time they were back to the path, Hiccup was swaying precariously back and forth. As they walked down the road his pace slowed, until his feet were dragging along the ground. Every few seconds he would draw himself up and walk with confidence, only to droop forward moments later.

"He's been struggling for awhile," Jack whispered to Merida, "We should stop." Just as he said this, Hiccup stumbled over his own feet, falling to the ground.

"Hey!" Merida exclaimed. Running forward, she helped Hiccup to his feet, but when she let go he almost fell again. She and Jack grabbed his arms, holding him up.

"I'm fine," he said. They released him momentarily and his knees buckled.

"Okay, maybe not so fine," he admitted.

"We need to make camp," Merida said. They moved back off the road into the grass. Merida stomped some of the stalks down, and Jack helped Hiccup to the ground. Merida sat beside him, scolding.

"You should've told us," she said, helping him out of his vest and shirt to see the cut on his side.

"It's not too deep," Hiccup said. Shaking her head, Merida took one of the knives they'd taken from the bandits and cut at her skirt, taking a good foot off at the bottom. She handed the knife and fabric to Jack.

"Cut that into strips," she said. Jack jumped to do as he was told. He wasn't used to blood and wounds, he never had to deal with them. Merida used another knife and ripped off one of her lower sleeves. With that she wiped gently at the blood, trying to see the wound, but more began welling up as soon as she pulled it away.

"You're lucky this isn't worse," she muttered, pressing the sleeve to the wound. She grabbed Hiccup's hand and put it over the fabric.

"Hold that," she said. Merida took the remnants of her skirt from Jack and told him to help Hiccup sit up. She wound the makeshift bandages around his middle, and tucked the ends in tightly. Then she helped him back into his shirt and vest.

"There. And DON'T move around too much. Just lay down and get some

rest," she said.

"Thanks Merida," Hiccup said as she stood. Merida looked around at the little clearing they'd made. It was warm enough that they didn't need a fire, and she wasn't sure she wanted one with bandits still roaming about. But Hiccup needed water, and quickly.

"I'll be back," Merida said.

"Woah, wait, what?" Hiccup said, "You're leaving?"

"You've got Jack to take care of you," Merida said.

"Precisely!" Hiccup said.

"Hey!" Jack interjected, "What's the matter with that?"

"No offense," Hiccup said, "You don't seem very good with this kind of stuff." Jack scowled.

"What kind of stuff?" he snapped. Hiccup shrugged.

"You know, wounds. And...nature," he replied.

"I'm fine with nature-no, I'm great with nature! I AM nature!"

"Merida! Don't leave me!" Hiccup called to Merida, who was already headed out into the dark forest.

"You'll live!" she shouted over her shoulder. Sighing, Hiccup looked to Jack, who was glaring at him.

"For the record, I am awesome with nature," Jack snapped. He flopped to the ground, facing away from Hiccup and crossing his arms angrily.

Merida knelt down, feeling the ground. It was moist. She was close to water. She had remembered the stream in the woods, and figured the water had to go somewhere. As she walked further into the grass, she thought she heard something moving around her. She pulled out the sword the bandits had left her with, expecting more black-clad villains to appear before her. Holding the weapon up, she listened for more noises. All that came to her ears was the sound of her own breath. Slowly, she turned, trying to see what was there despite the moon's poor lighting.

Without warning, Merida was knocked to the ground by a fast-moving creature. She flung the sword around, managing to hit whatever it was with the flat of the blade. The thing made a squealing noise, and jumped off of her, leaving faint claw marks in her shoulders. Scrambling to her feet, Merida held the sword out at her attacker. As she got a good look at it, she frowned, puzzled.

At first she thought it was a small bear, black and furry with large round ears and big brown eyes. But then she saw that it was wearing clothes, and it seemed to sit more like a human child than any animal she'd ever seen. And it was crying. Merida scowled.

"What are you?!" she snapped, feeling slightly foolish for talking to

an animal. The bear-child didn't answer, but put its face in its paws and cried a little harder. Merida felt her eyebrows raise against her will. _No! _she scolded herself,_ it's a magic beast! _But she couldn't stop the pity that crept into her mind. Letting out a sound of frustration, she dropped the sword and knelt down by the creature.

"What are you?" she asked again, softer this time. The bear-child's crying lightened, and it raised its head just enough to show wide, wet eyes. _Aw, cute_, Merida couldn't help but think.

"I'm Mathe," the creature said. Merida nearly fell backwards as the bear-childâ€œMatheâ€œactually responded.

"I'm Merida," she said, shaken. Mathe dropped his hands into his lap, grinning toothily.

"Hi," he said. Merida watched him mistrustfully.

"What are you?" she asked fro the third time.

"I told you," Mathe said, "I'm Mathe." Merida shook her head.

"Yes but _what_ are you?" she pressed. Realization flashed over the bear's face.

"Oh!" he said, then shook his head roughly. Merida jumped back, watching in amazement as the black fur disappeared and his features shifted into that of a wide-faced young boy with black hair and large brown eyes. He grinned.

"I'm sorry!" he said, "I got scared." Merida nodded slowly, wide-eyed.

"Wh-Where are your parents?" she stuttered. Mathe shook his head.

"In the village," he said.

"Village? Where?" Merida asked, thinking immediately of better bandages and maybe even a needle and thread to stitch Hiccup's wound. And water. And food. Oh yes, definitely food. Mathe narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms, looking up at Merida shrewdly.

"You aren't a bad guy, are you?" he asked. Merida shook her head emphatically.

"No! No I'm not! But I have a friend who was hurt by a bad guy. He's back by the road, and he needs water and bandages. Does your village have those?" Mathe examined her critically for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes. Go get your friends and come back here. I'll take you to the village," he said. Merida hesitated. What if he disappeared the minute she turned her back?

"_Well?_" Mathe said, making a shooing motion with his hands, "I'm _waiting_." Merida turned and started running back towards the boys.

oOo

Jack jumped to his feet as Merida burst back into their little clearing.

"What's wrong?" he asked. Hiccup tried to sit up, but failed miserably and flopped back onto the flattened grass. Merida walked over to him and helped him to his feet, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

"There's a village nearby," she said, "Follow me." She led Hiccup into the grass. Jack followed them, hesitant.

"Hold on," he said, "You just found a village in the middle of this field?"

"No," Merida called over her shoulder, "I ran into a young boy. He says there's one nearby. He's going to take us there." Jack sped up, walking alongside them.

"You're going to trust a random kid you met in the middle of a field? What if he's with the bandits?" Merida stopped suddenly, throwing Hiccup off-balance.

"Ow, ow, ow," he protested.

"Sorry," she said quickly, then looked at Jack, "Hiccup needs help. Real help." Jack glanced between the two of them. Merida was scowling at him, daring him to say no. Hiccup was just staring at him with this desperate, pained look in his eyes.

"Ugh, fine!" Jack said, "But if this kid turns us over to the bandits, I'm blaming you."

"Fair enough," Merida said under her breath, and continued towards where she had left Mathe.

oOo

"Mathe? Bear boy?" Merida called when they reached the spot (near as she could tell). The boy didn't appear. Hiccup, sweating profusely, hung off her shoulder. Jack supported Hiccup's other side, and was growing impatient.

"Merida, he's not here," Jack said. Merida shot him a glare and called a little louder.

"Mathe? Come out! I've come back with my friends, we need your help," she said. She waited for a moment, staring at the moonlight field around her. The grasses swayed back and forth, undisturbed by any small potential saviors coming her way. Hiccup seemed to grow heavier and heavier on her shoulder, now that her hope was slowly fading.

Jack yelped, jumping away from Hiccup and leaving Merida to support him completely.

"Jack!" Merida snapped.

"Ow..." Hiccup groaned.

"Something touched me!" Jack said, then realized how high-pitched his voice was and cleared his throat, embarrassed.

"Hello!" another high-pitched voice said from in front of Merida. She looked down, and found Mathe standing there. He was half-bear, half-child, staring up at her with glassy eyes.

"What is THAT!?" Jack yelled.

"Oh, hush up! It's Mathe," Merida scolded.

"It's a bear," Jack said.

"What did you think 'bear boy' meant?" Merida asked.

"I don't know, not this!" Hiccup raised his head from Merida's shoulder.

"Okay!" he moaned, "Can we please just follow the little bear to his village? Please?"

"Alright," Merida said.

"Sure, whatever," said Jack. Mathe blinked twice, then scratched his ear with a half-formed claw.

"If you're all done now, the village is this way," he said. He turned and started off through the grass. Jack pulled Hiccup's arm back over his shoulder, and they followed.

End
file.